

FISH & WILDLIFE COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM COVER SHEET

Meeting Date: October 16, 2014

Agenda Item: Bighorn Sheep Transplant Update & Request for Out-of-State Transplants

Division: Wildlife

Action Needed: Endorsement

Time Needed on Agenda for this Presentation: 30 minutes

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Background

Transplanting bighorn sheep is an effective tool for augmenting existing populations or reintroducing sheep to new areas, and for reducing sheep numbers where there are too many. These efforts are consistent with the Montana Bighorn Sheep Conservation Strategy which provides direction to FWP to (p. 5), “Establish five new viable and huntable populations over the course of the next 10 years and augment existing populations where appropriate.” Such projects require F&W Commission endorsement, and monies are available from auction licenses. All animals would get a health assessment at capture. FWP continues to look for new areas to plant sheep but is repeatedly foiled by concerns over inadequate habitat, particularly winter range, the lack of adequate public access necessary for a huntable population, the proximity of domestic sheep and/or goats that pose a disease threat, or, in the case of establishing a metapopulation, establishing a pathway for disease transmission to a healthy herd in the event of an outbreak. As stated in the Conservation Strategy (p. 42), “The protection of the integrity and health of existing populations and metapopulations has to be the first priority in management of bighorn sheep as opposed to creating new metapopulations.” There are three items for the Commission to consider today:

- FWP does not consider Livingston Peak to be a good candidate for bighorn sheep introduction because of inadequate winter range, the lack of public access on likely winter ranges, the proximity of domestic sheep, and the likely connection with the existing Mill Creek herd that would provide a conduit for disease between the two herds.
- Bighorn sheep in HD 482 (Missouri Breaks south of Missouri River) are over the population level appropriate to safeguard this population against a disease outbreak (Population Objective = 325, July 2014 count = 436). We would like to have the option of potentially capturing a few sheep (<10) across the river in HD 680 (functionally the same population) if necessary to complete a capture goal.
- It is current Commission policy to not send sheep out-of-state. Because we have a need to reduce some Montana populations and it is getting more and more difficult to find places in-state to put them, we would like to be able to move sheep out-of-state. There is a current request from South Dakota for this coming winter (2014-15) and requests from Nebraska and Washington for the winter of 2015-16.

Public Involvement Process & Results

There is opportunity for public input at the Commission meeting.

Agency Recommendation & Rationale

At this time, FWP recommends not pursuing a reintroduction on Livingston Peak, reducing sheep in HD 482, and seeks Commission endorsement to move sheep out-of-state.

Proposed Motion

I move the F&W Commission not endorse a bighorn reintroduction to Livingston Peak, endorse reducing sheep in HD 482, and endorse FWP being able to move bighorns out-of-state.